

What is claimed is:

1. A system for offering to a user alternate products similar to a requested product, comprising:

a first user interface to receive a user request for a product, such product having product attributes;

a search procedure to select a set of candidate alternate products having attributes similar to the requested product attributes;

a sort procedure to rank the candidate alternate products in order of decreasing similarity to the requested product; and;

a second user interface to present the candidate products to the user.

2. The system of Claim 1, wherein the first and second user interfaces are combined to function as a single interface.

3. The system of Claim 1, further comprising:

a database connected to the search procedure, the database containing information identifying available products, the availability of such products, and the attributes of such products.

4. The system of Claim 3, wherein the second user interface, when the user selects an alternate product, causes information regarding the availability of the selected alternate product to be updated.

5. A method for offering, to a user, alternate products similar to a requested product, comprising the steps of:

receiving from the user a request for a preferred product;

selecting a set of alternative products having attributes similar to the preferred product;

rank ordering the alternative products according to their degree of similarity with the preferred products and

presenting to the user the list of alternative products.

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6. The method of Claim 5, wherein the selecting step comprises the steps of:

determining a set of attributes of the desired product;

calculating values representing measures of similarity for attributes of products other than the preferred product;

calculating product similarities for the other products as a function of the attribute similarities; and

selecting as the set of alternative products those other products having a product similarity greater than a selected threshold.

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